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IN MEMORIAM.

JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER.

LONDON,

February 20th, 1905

SMITHSONIAN
INSTITUTION
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A SPEECH DELIVERED BY

PROFESSOR WALTER RALEIGH

AT THE CAFÉ ROYAL, LONDON, AT THE BANQUET ON THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING OF THE WHISTLER MEMORIAL EXHIBITION.

February 20th, 1905.

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MR. PRESIDENT, MY LORDS, AND GENTLEMEN,—

We are met to celebrate the memory of a very great man, and to do honour to the work in which he has perpetuated that memory. Mr. Whistler was a man good at many things; he was a wit, and a warrior, and the most versatile of craftsmen. But he was more than this; and it is as a creator and servant of beauty that he claims our remembrance to-night. Beauty, and beauty only, he said, was the justification and aim and end of a work of art. Surely, in the history of the world, there has seldom been such a collection of the works of one man which was pervaded and inspired and possessed by the desire of beauty as the wonderful collection now to be exhibited in the New Gallery is pervaded and inspired and possessed. Every touch and every line in those canvases and prints bears its part in the unceasing quest and shares in the triumph of the capture. The labour is over; and we are permitted to take our pleasure, every man according to his capacity, in the rich reward.

You will not expect me, I am sure, in the face of these pictures, to discuss or expound any theories of art. The practice is better. Not the most brilliant of his theoretic utterances could express Mr. Whistler a hundredth part so adequately as these works of his. Indeed, his own theories, though they are neat and pointed and polished, edged with wit, and often animated by a profound knowledge, seem to me to fall far short of expressing him. He taught his age to look *at* a picture, not *through* it; and the lesson was a needed one. But in his zeal to reprove the public for their preoccupation with incident and morality, he was apt to deny to his pictures qualities which, after all, they have. Call a picture what you will, a pattern, or a symphony, or an arrangement, or (if you like) call it merely a picture, still this is true of it: that when an artist has done his best at symphony, or arrangement, there comes to him sometimes an unsought increment on his effort; something that he did not consciously work for, perhaps does not even know that he has attained. In Mr. Whistler's figure-pieces there is often a tenderness and grace and pathos of human emotion which is unaccounted for by the theory, but which is his no less than the more purely optical qualities that he laid stress on. The intensity of his purpose overshoots itself and reveals to him more than he is seeking.

He stood aloof—more completely aloof, perhaps, than most other great artists have done—from the movements and schools of his own time. His early work belongs to a notable time of artistic ferment. The Pre-Raphaelites were teaching what I may call their new morality of vision; the Impressionists were working out their new psychology of vision. He belonged to neither school. He picked up hints and suggestions, no doubt, from these and a hundred other sources, but in the main he was independent and original—in the right sense of that word. That is to say, he began at the beginning; in each of his works he creates afresh, as it were; he accepts every subject as presenting a new problem to be grappled with, a new set of conditions to be studied and subdued, by new devices, to the service of beauty. I am not decrying the utility of "schools" if I say that the most robust and splendid of them may interfere, by the very greatness of their traditions, with that incessant watchfulness, that alert vitality, and that readiness for new experiment which is found in all Mr. Whistler's work. It is the misfortune of the schools that they give a false importance to acquisitive and imitative talent. And there is one school, at least, which is apt to cramp the work even of a man of genius—the school of his own past successes. If the love of ease entices him, his very triumphs become his enemies,

by tempting him into formula and repetition. But to the end of his life, Mr. Whistler never rested upon success; he went on seeking for new worlds to conquer. "If you want to rest," he once said to a friend who complained that there was no easy-chair in his house—"if you want to rest you had better go to bed"—and the remark might be taken as the motto of his artistic career; as the motto, indeed, of the career of any artist.

An alertness like this finds its ample reward. It keeps a man's intelligence and sympathies open for new lessons from Art and Nature. It was by his sleepless activity of mind that Mr. Whistler was enabled to become the interpreter, and the pioneer in Europe, of the art of the Japanese. In this, I believe, he was something of a discoverer, and brought from the East, not gold nor spices, but a new charm. He may be said to have inaugurated, in the happiest way, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance—an Alliance which, in the realm of Art, is neither offensive nor defensive, but devoted to mutual appreciation and mutual delight—a kind of friendly tournament on the Field of the Cloth of Gold. And, besides Japan, there was another great teacher from whom he never ceased to learn—the Goddess Nature, whom he was wont to patronise with a certain humorous bravado. She had so much he did not want, that he was inclined to regard her as a busybody, an officious and too importunate saleswoman, pressing her garish stores of goods on his attention. Yet how much did he not learn from his sensitive and untiring observation of Nature? When did he cease to study her moving benediction of light? The public of his time asked a painter for recognisable and clearly defined pictorial symbols of common objects. But these objects, to an eye not blinded by habit, exist in a strange submarine

world, a shifting and glimmering sea of light and air. It was this sea that Mr. Whistler cared for—this sea in its gentlest undulating moods; and, although I dare not judge others by my own case, yet I believe there are many artists who were taught by his work, as I, in my layman's ignorance, was taught, to take a keener pleasure in observing how light caresses the surfaces of things, and how air softens their outlines.

But the highest praise remains to tell. Wherever artists are gathered together, Mr. Whistler cannot be too much honoured for what has been well called his "implacable conscience." He found no use on this earth for critics. But there never lived a severer critic of himself. Among all the temptations that assail an artist he walked so absolutely unspotted and unsubdued, with so confident a gaiety, that it seems unfair to say that he resisted temptation; it is almost as if he had never been tempted. He would destroy any of his works rather than leave a careless or inexpressive touch within the limits of the frame. He would begin again a hundred times over, rather than attempt, by patching, to make his work seem better than it was. He was not content till he had got what he wanted, and his work expressed himself at his best. And this was the cause, I think, of his remarkably strong sense of property in his pictures. They were his children, a part of himself, and that they should be sold into slavery, that anything so accidental and external as the payment of money should alienate or impair his rights in them, always seemed to him, I think, a mere piece of inhumanity and impertinence on the part of the law.

Consider the irony of things. Here was one of the most serious-minded men that have ever lived in this world. For a long time he was widely and authoritatively regarded as a trifler and a jester, one who evaded difficulties and sought a cheap reputation for eccentricity. I will not remind you of any incidents in the famous trial, though it still has its lessons for artists and critics. Any one who takes up the full report of that trial and reads it now, will rub his eyes and wonder. It tells how the official worlds of Art and Criticism were ranged against Mr. Whistler and a few friends. Many of the witnesses no doubt repented later of their evidence—of being so busy with their tongues and so idle with their eyes. But no man goes through an experience of this kind untouched. Mr. Whistler went on with his work—that is the great thing—and provided himself with a defence against the world. Laughter, which is often used for defensive purposes by those who have good wits and sensitive tempers, became his shield and his spear. His attitude to the public was exactly the attitude taken up by Robert Browning, who suffered as long a period of neglect and mistake, in those lines of *The Ring and the Book:*

> "Well, British Public, ye who like me not,
> (God love you!) and will have your proper laugh
> At the dark question:—laugh it! I laugh first."

Mr. Whistler always laughed first. So he carried the war into the enemy's country. They treated the business which was no less than a religion to him as if it were a pretence and a trifle. What wonder if he treated in the same spirit the business which was most serious to them? Politics, society, banking—these also are serious affairs. But one who comes across them in his moments of relaxation, after a long and grim struggle with one of the most difficult crafts in the world, may be excused if he finds in them plentiful opportunities for amusement. After all, an artist must be amused—it is the breath of his nostrils; he must find delight or make it, whether from understanding things, or from indulging his humour in wilfully misunderstanding them. Where Mr. Whistler found delight in misunderstanding, he also gave delight by his child-like glee and by his powers of wit—a wit not employed in great campaigns, but decorated and tempered and worn by the side, or flourished in the hand, as a fit addition to courtly dress.

He gained recognition at last. Wherever a man of genius spends an arduous life in the lonely pursuit of his aims, you find the same sequel, in posthumous subscriptions, or on graven memorial stones, or in those honorary degrees which are conferred by Universities on famous veterans. I am glad to think that the honorary degree which was conferred on Mr. Whistler some two years ago by the University of Glasgow gave him sincere pleasure. I know it was felt by those whose votes conferred it, that if a living painter was to be chosen from among the English-speaking peoples for academic honours, there could be no question what name to choose. I think the precedent was a good one; and I trust it will be followed up. If a University is to represent all that is best in the intelligence and skill of a nation, it can ill afford to neglect the Fine Arts. Let the great artist take refuge in isolation if he will, but do not force it upon him. For, indeed, his work, though he refuses to submit it to the popular suffrage, or to modify it by the opinions of critics, is an asset of civilisation, a possession for ever; and his example is a model for all workers in its unflagging persistence and in its devotion to some of the greatest and best things that are attainable by the frailty of our human nature.

Gentlemen, I give you the toast of

"The Memory of Whistler."

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